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ABSTRACT

Many nineteenth-century reformers tried to improve the lot of the poor by improving the poor themselves, attributing many of the problems of the poor to bad behavior or bad character, and this approach did not end in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. As a strategy, improving poor people has consistently given education a starring role. The history of education shows that improving poor people has not only misdiagnosed the issues, it has also deflected attention from the structural origins of poverty and the solutions it really requires. This book explores attempts to improve poor people during the last two centuries as it illustrates the public uses of history. The four chapters focus on: (1) The Welfare State; (2) The "Underclass"; (3) Urban Schools; and (4) Surviving Poverty. Each chapter begins autobiographically, with an account of personal involvement in the issues, and explains how history has proved essential to the interpretation of each strand of social policy discussed. Looking at how poor people have survived by examining the lives of some poor people in early twentieth-century New York gives some insights into possible solutions and approaches to these problems. (SLD)

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